

*Blindfold a volunteer ask them to describe people in the room while getting everyone to flap their arms.* Our reading this morning is about blindness – the inability to see what God is doing in our midst.

We follow on from last week's reading, also a story set in a vineyard, about two sons: one refusing to work but goes anyway, and another son who seems compliant but then doesn't complete the task set. These aren't parables about the kingdom of heaven – they aren't prefaced by the magic words 'the kingdom [of heaven/ of God] is like'. They are about human nature.

This parable and its inclusion in Matthew, Luke and Mark's accounts is a testament to not only its authenticity, but the way in which several church communities found it to be important enough to include in their own recollections of Jesus' teachings. It will have had a profound impact on the early churches.

Today's reading is unmistakable who Jesus is speaking too as it is easy to identify Jesus talking directly to the religious leaders. Yet so much of Jesus' teaching from Matthew's account speaks deeper, and we might miss his meaning as much as those listening did.

Because what is really interesting here is how human nature can be distracted from what Jesus is saying. The religious leaders certainly were distracted. As they placed themselves directly into the story, we should ask ourselves 'what did they miss'. In doing so we should then have a revelation that speaks into our own hearts.

Because let's face it. If we place ourselves in the story, we don't beat up prophets? We might not necessarily listen, but it is hard to discern what the Spirit is speaking through someone to us as a church. We can even put barriers up to stop us having to listen in the first place. But we never physically beating them up. Surely?

I'll leave that with you. The point of this reading, and its continuing from last week, is that we might not focus on placing ourselves in the story, as we get caught up in our own mind set and worrying about ourselves. We begin a process of self-justification and we miss the real revelation. We miss the truly good news that is spoken.

By placing ourselves in the story we do the same as the chief priests and Pharisees. They want to get rid of Jesus, silence his ideas. They wish to disband his followers, and for the status quo to continue.

Both this and last weeks' readings are a response Jesus' authority to teach being challenged. Listen again then in this context.

*An absentee landlord plants a vineyard, sets it up, put tenants in it, sends servants to give instruction who are beaten and killed by the tenants. More and more servants are sent with the same result. Finally, the landowner sends his son, and the tenants kill him.*

For the religious authorities, the reason to arrest Jesus is given to them on a plate. As they place themselves in the parable, they acknowledge that as the tenants, they are responsible for killing prophets, but as they seek to silence Jesus and his followers, they will be destroyed when God comes down as Jesus has identified himself as the Son of God.

So why did they hesitate? They are caught up in their own thoughts and fear of their lives. At no point did they ask what was Jesus doing? At no point did they say, 'would it have been better that the prophets hadn't been killed?' Or 'maybe we should listen to this new prophetically voice?' No instead, they focused on their role in the story, and the aftermath, that they would be dashed to their own deaths by crowds who say Jesus as a prophet!

This part of human nature is inattentional blindness, or perceptual blindness and was first described by Arien Mack and Irvin Rock in 1992 from MIT. The idea is that when we have too much stimuli we simply don't see what is in front of our nose. Magicians use the effect, and if I was clever enough I would have done a magic trick, but try as I might, I can never convince a rabbit to pop out of a hat.

They missed out on seeing and hearing and responding to God in their very midst. God was doing amazing things around them, but they were focused utterly on themselves.

This is the Gospel truth: Never be blind to the work of God in our midst. Always call out when you see God at work. Give God the glory, it informs those who are nearby that God is working. To silence something that should cause you to reflect ultimately will refocus you to purely on maintain your self-justification. Don't be afraid of praising God for the relief from illness, the finding of a lost coin or misplaced keys. See that God is walking with us every step of the way, in the tough times and the superb.

## **Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV from bible.oremus.org)**

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants 21:33 <sup>1</sup>Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup>But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." <sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." <sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup>Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" <sup>41</sup>They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

<sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes?"

<sup>43</sup>Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. <sup>44</sup>The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

<sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup>They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

## **Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV from bible.oremus.org)**

<sup>23</sup>Jesus entered the temple and began to teach. The chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

<sup>24</sup>Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"' <sup>26</sup>But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

<sup>28</sup> Jesus gave them something to think about. He said to them:

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." <sup>29</sup>He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'